

Life after Dance: Career Transition of Professional Dancers

Joan Jeffri

Director, Research Center for Arts and Culture and Program in Arts Administration
Columbia University Teachers College

David Throsby

Professor of Economics
Macquarie University

Joan Jeffri, director of the Research Center for Arts and Culture and the Program in Arts Administration at Teachers College, Columbia University, recently completed Information on Artists III in the Bay Area and Changing the Beat: a Study of the Worklife of Jazz Musicians. Author of The Emerging Arts: Management, Survival and Growth and ArtsMoney: Raising It, Saving It and Earning It, she has a particular interest in the care and survival of artists.

David Throsby is Professor of Economics at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. His research interests in the economics of the arts and culture include the economic situation of individual artists, the economics of the performing arts, cultural heritage, sustainability of cultural development and the relationships between economic and cultural policy. His most recent book, Economics and Culture, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2001.

Abstract

This paper evaluates the findings of a coordinated inquiry into the career transition of professional dancers by a research team of Joan Jeffri (U.S.), and cultural economists William Baumol (U.S.) and David Throsby (Australia). “Dancers” included those in ballet/classical, modern/contemporary, indigenous/folk, commercial/show dance and “other.” Sample surveys were undertaken in three countries—Australia, Switzerland and the United States—to provide insights into the challenges of career change as seen from the viewpoint of the individual dancer. The paper examines how the findings do or do not support certain a priori hypotheses, the researchers’ expectations and the dancers’ realities, and the differences across the 3 survey countries.

Keywords

Careers, Career Transition, Dancers, Employment, Retirement.

At a presentation of our findings in Monaco, in a conference room alongside the Monaco Dance Forum, one of the present authors, David Throsby, told the story of an Aboriginal dancer in Australia who had danced in a major indigenous dance company for twenty years and then returned back to his tribe as its chief legal person. This was expected as a natural progression of his life and his responsibility to his community. This anecdote illuminates the difficulty of speaking about career transition for dancers in a global way.

In 2000 the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University’s Teachers College was approached by a board of persons knowledgeable about dance and the International Organization for the Transition of Professional Dancers (IOTPD) based in Lausanne,

Switzerland, to provide some hard data about the challenges and realities of dancers' career transition. This first study of its kind became a coordinated inquiry into the career transition of professional dancers by a research team of Joan Jeffri (US), and cultural economists William Baumol (US) and David Throsby (Australia)¹. "Dancers" included those in ballet/classical, modern/contemporary, indigenous/folk, commercial/show dance and "other." Sample surveys were undertaken in three countries—Australia, Switzerland and the United States—to provide insights into the challenges of career change as seen from the viewpoint of the individual dancer.

As the anecdote above illustrates, "career transition" is not a universal concept in all cultures and, even with the broad definitions of dancers, it was not possible to collect data on every kind of dancer in each of the countries under study. A major challenge was the identification of former dancers, which was handled somewhat differently in the three study countries. A questionnaire was devised which was directed both to current and former dancers for three reasons: 1) it would be valuable to gain insights from current dancers about their expectations and preparation for transition; 2) the comparison of expectations from current dancers and realities from former dancers could help to illuminate recommendations for future action and 3) it was extremely difficult to identify former dancers before the survey was distributed; the responses from former dancers were usually through companies and venues where both current and former dancers had allegiances. In Australia, one of the present authors had recently been involved in a study of artists which included current dancers. With these and other contacts and with the help of the Australian service agency Ausdance, former dancers were located². In the United States, an institutional sample was taken from lists of dance companies, unions, conservatories, educational institutions and the US organization, Career Transition for Dancers. In Switzerland, the questionnaire was translated into both German and French and dance companies were visited and questionnaires delivered and collected in person.

Dancers share a devotion to an art form that requires discipline, dedication and commitment. And while they also share the indignities of low pay with many other different types of workers, as professionals they are uniquely committed to long hours of effort required to perfect their art, while undergoing the risk of physical injury and emotional distress, and forging a career that is likely to begin in elementary school and end before they are 40. For professional dancers reaching the end of their performing careers, the economic, psychological, and educational difficulties for which they are often ill-equipped are likely to have a profound effect on the rest of their lives. If we are to sustain a cultural activity that rests on human accomplishment we must understand the career transition difficulties faced by those who are some of its best exemplars.

The research was based on a series of hypotheses about the transition process and its effects (see Appendix A). This paper evaluates some of the findings of the research, how they do or do not support these hypotheses and the differences across the three survey countries.

Background

Kevin MacKenzie, Artistic Director, American Ballet Theatre, said: "The retiring dancer and the heartbroken lover are never more alike than when their relationships end."³ And, like the lover, the dancer often endures a certain amount of heartbreak when his or her career ends – and while no one is surprised at the heartbreak of first love, the nature of heartbreak for the dancer is more poignant if he or she is unprepared, still relatively young, perhaps physically injured.

The analogy with the heartbroken lover can be carried further; like the end of an affair, the end of a dancing career can be a shock. A current male dancer in his 40s from our survey stated, “We are taught to tendú and plié but nobody tells you what it’s going to be like when it’s over”. A former female dancer, 61 years old, said “I thought I would dance forever. It was a shock when I had to stop”.

The very strong identification dancers have with their profession often exacerbates the heartbreak. “Who am I if not a dancer?” asks a former dancer, a female in her late 50s. An Australian former dancer, also a female, says “Leaving dance can feel like one is losing one’s identity because one has been a dancer for the most part of one’s life not just one’s working life.”

Awareness

The challenges that a dancer’s career transition presents include physical problems, loss of income, uncertainty about the future, and a sense of emptiness at having to give up something that has been so important for so long. One surprising finding of our study was that current dancers are actually more aware of these challenges than we thought. Overall, the great majority of current dancers claim to be either “very aware” or “somewhat aware” of the challenges that transition will pose (98, 86 and 92 percent, in the US, Switzerland, and Australia respectively). However, many former dancers concede that they were in fact ill-prepared for this process. So, what accounts for this difference? One possibility is that this awareness may be generational and the former dancers may not have had as many opportunities to consider transition issues as their younger colleagues. Another explanation is that in the last twenty years, the four career transition centers have become vital and active in the dance community in their respective countries⁴, and studies like the National Endowment for the Arts’ Life After Dancing have helped to give the subject currency (Wallach, 1998). Further, it could be that, very much like occupational injuries for musicians which have been well-known but kept concealed for many years, transition has begun to be viewed by some as an integral part of a dancer’s career process rather than its annihilation. So, it seems the career transition message is getting out there.

Preparedness

It’s one thing to be aware that challenges lie ahead. It’s quite another to be prepared to meet them. We expected to find that dancers who were prepared for transition would handle the process better and would have a higher level of satisfaction with their post-transition careers. In fact our findings do bear these propositions out; our survey results show a markedly higher level of post-transition career satisfaction among those fully prepared to meet transition than among those not fully prepared. Moreover, the incomes in the immediate post-transition period of those fully prepared were higher than for those not fully prepared. One thing that surprised us, however, was that this income advantage apparently associated with preparedness for transition was maintained in the longer term, though the distance between the fully-prepared and the not-fully-prepared groups appears to narrow over time, as can be seen in Table 1. All in all, the conclusion is inescapable: preparation is key.

Yet, surprisingly enough, sometimes dancers consciously avoid preparing for transition. A former male dancer from Australia noted, “Dancers do not fully explore career options whilst

dancing for fear that it will jeopardize their career. Lack of confidence to do something else and succeed make the transition period difficult.” This unwillingness of some dancers to confront the future prospect of a major life event is understandable, but, in the long run, regrettable. Its existence emphasizes the need for strategies to help these dancers become aware of transition issues in a sympathetic and understanding way, acknowledging the fears and uncertainties and reassuring them that their current dancing careers need not be adversely affected by thinking about and planning for their post-dance lives.

**Table 1:
Former Dancers' Preparedness for Transition and Post-Transition Income
(Unweighted Mean Percent of Dancers)**

	Post-transition income			
	Higher than when a dancer	Lower than when a dancer	Same as when a dancer	Total
<u>Income 12 months after transition</u>	%	%	%	%
Dancer 'fully prepared'	39	41	20	100
Dancer not 'fully prepared'	27	54	18	100
<u>Income now</u>				
Dancer 'fully prepared'	63	27	10	100
Dancer not 'fully prepared'	58	32	10	100

The End of a Dance Career

We expected that dancers would have a realistic idea of the length of their careers. Of course, it is well-known in the field of dance, particularly for classical dancers, that the span of a professional career is short in years compared to most other professions. While most dancers acknowledge this, our results show that currently active dancers expect to continue their performing careers well into their forties. However, former dancers reported that although they thought they could continue until their late thirties, on average they actually stopped dancing professionally in their early to mid-thirties. Table 2 shows the mean and median ages at which current dancers expect to end their performing careers and the corresponding ages at which former dancers actually did stop active dancing.

**Table 2:
Mean and Median Ages of Transition, Expected And Actual (Years)**

	Australia		Switzerland		United States	
	Current dancers: expected	Former dancers: actual	Current dancers: expected	Former dancers: actual	Current dancers: expected	Former dancers: actual
	yrs.	yrs.	yrs.	yrs.	yrs.	yrs.
Mean age	46,6	32,2	40,9	34,6	40,9	33,9
Median age	40,0	30,0	38,0	35,0	40,0	33,0

The impending end of a dance career brings with it a series of concerns about the future. It is well-known that physical injury truncates many dancers' careers and, in fact, this was confirmed by half the current dancers in Australia, Switzerland and the United States who reported that they expected physical problems would be likely to pose a serious challenge at the end of their careers. Former dancers were able to tell us what their actual challenges were at the end of their careers (see Table 3). While physical problems still topped the list as the most serious challenge nominated by Swiss former dancers, it was losing income that most concerned US dancers. Difficulty knowing what to do next was the most serious challenge identified by the largest number of Australian dancers. Altogether, these findings underscore the common notion that the end of a career in dance is "one of life's little deaths," which dancers often say they must mourn the loss of before they can continue in another career. Former dancer Edward Villella commented, "I fought like crazy not to be depressed. But I certainly think I was for about ten years."⁵

**Table 3:
Challenges at End of Dance Career (Per Cent of Dancers)**

Challenges	Australia		Switzerland		United States	
	Current dancers: expected	Former dancers: actual	Current dancers: expected	Former dancers: actual	Current dancers: expected	Former dancers: actual
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Physical problems	63	41	50	38	55	44
Loss of status	36	26	17	19	41	32
Loss of income	57	43	46	25	49	40
Loss of support network	28	19	16	13	22	21
Emotional problems	27	24	39	37	27	25
Difficulty deciding what to do next	44	31	39	15	55	42
Sense of emptiness	50	31	41	20	47	49
Other challenge	4	12	9	23	4	16
Don't know	6	5	5	3	6	-

Note: multiple responses permitted, hence columns sum to more than 100; - indicates nil in this sample.

Post-Transition Careers

It is often thought that after finishing their careers as active performers, dancers will want to maintain some contact with dance in their post-transition lives. Our results provide some evidence concerning this proposition. First, it must be said that a desire amongst dancers to remain in the field may be somewhat unrealistic, since there are a limited number of jobs as choreographers, dance teachers, dance coaches and with dance companies, even in such related areas as costume design. And, of course, this is affected by the size and conditions of the labor market in each country. Nevertheless, around half of the current dancers we surveyed in Australia and Switzerland indicated that their most preferred occupation after transition would be choreography, dance teaching or some other dance-related work, although only one-quarter of current US dancers expressed this preference. As it turns out, significant numbers of former dancers in Australia and Switzerland (36 and 43 percent respectively) do indeed have a full-time dance-related occupation, although only 26 percent in the US do. This has not been the experience of the four transition centres, which suggest that no more than some 10 to 15 percent of their clients moved into a dance-related career.

Of course, dancers can maintain some involvement with dance, even though their primary occupation lies elsewhere. So, for example, around 70 percent of Australian and Swiss former dancers and about 50 percent of US former dancers do or have done some dance teaching since transition, even though many of these are also involved in further education, domestic duties, or working in some other field. Similarly, somewhere between one-third and one-half of former dancers do or have done some choreography.

Not surprisingly, not all dancers want to retain some connection with the dance world after they retire from active performance. Our results show small numbers of dancers whose most preferred work after transition lies completely outside the field of dance; these people (roughly 10 percent of our whole sample) seem to relish the prospect of taking up an entirely new career for the second half of their lives and forgetting about dance altogether. Nevertheless, we must conclude that at least holding out the prospect of some form of continuing involvement with dance after transition is likely to be of some reassurance to the majority of dancers contemplating the end of their performing careers. Hence some reference to this prospect in transition programs is appropriate.

Retraining

Our research indicates that the skills and experience that professional dancers accumulate during their dancing years, including self-discipline, team work and stamina, are significant and transferable resources that are in danger of being wasted as their active dancing careers come to an end. Details are shown in Table 4, derived from data for current and former dancers combined. Ironically, while dancers invest an enormous amount of time in their education, much of this training does not confer a formal degree so that future careers often require additional education. It should be noted here that the general trend in lifelong learning, particularly in the United States, bodes well for dancers seeking further education. Where once dancers retraining for an alternative career might have been seen as 'betraying the cause', multiple careers are now seen as the norm in many countries.

It is, of course, widely understood in the world at large that education and the qualifications it brings are essential to the pursuit of a successful career in all but the most unskilled of

occupations. Dancers are no exception in recognizing that a post-transition career will be facilitated by further education or training. Only a handful of current dancers answered “Probably not” or Definitely not” to the question as to whether they intended to undertake further study after transition (4 percent in the US, 7 percent in Australia, and 16 percent in Switzerland). Similarly, among former dancers only around 15 percent across our whole sample have not undertaken further education and don’t intend to.

Nonetheless, retraining comes with significant challenges both for individual dancers and for those trying to help them move to a new career. Education is time consuming and costly; it will take several years at least and cost anything up to \$US25,000 or more. About half of former dancers in all three countries indicated that they had to make significant commitments of their own funds to finance their further study.

However, there are financial and non-financial benefits at the end of the rainbow. In general our results show consistently that post-transition incomes of dancers who undertake further education are higher than those of dancers who do not, whether the education is undertaken before or after transition occurs. Furthermore, job satisfaction tends to be higher amongst the better educated. It is clear that for the majority of individuals, some form of retraining is likely to be beneficial in advancing their post-transition careers.

**Table 4:
Skills Acquired Through Being a Dancer (Per Cent of Dancers)**

Skills	Australia		Switzerland		United States	
	Useful ^(a)	Most important ^(b)	Useful ^(a)	Most important ^(b)	Useful ^(a)	Most important ^(b)
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Communication skills	56	9	58	13	54	9
Competitiveness	54	1	47	2	71	1
Cooperation, teamwork	75	11	60	12	78	10
Initiative	57	14	43	7	61	3
Leadership	39	-	30	*	46	2
Personal presentation	75	1	61	5	76	3
Physical self confidence, dexterity	74	2	69	7	75	2
Self-discipline	81	47	82	32	81	56
Stamina, persistence	79	7	70	13	83	10
Other	12	9	16	7	18	4

Note: ^(a) multiple responses permitted, hence columns sum to more than 100; ^(b) sum subject to rounding error;

* indicates less than 0.5 per cent; - indicates nil response in this sample.

It has to be noted, however, that regardless of the retraining situation, all dancers are likely to suffer a significant drop in income in the twelve months or so after transition, as their new life gets started. After this their incomes can be expected to improve, and in most cases, whether they have undertaken further education or not, their incomes are likely to be higher than when

they were a dancer (see Table 5). This is hardly surprising, given the very low incomes that dancers typically earn during their performing careers.

**Table 5:
Former Dancers: Changes in Income After Transition (Per Cent of Dancers)**

	Australia		Switzerland		United States	
	Income 12 months after	Income now	Income 12 months after	Income now	Income 12 months after	Income now
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Higher than when a dancer	30	60	38	64	20	44
Lower than when a dancer	42	28	41	21	61	39
Same as when a dancer	24	6	17	11	14	11
Don't know	5	7	4	4	5	5
Total ^(a)	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: ^(a) Column sums subject to rounding error.

Support Systems

There are many types of support that are helpful to dancers in the career transition process, including financial assistance, emotional support, counselling programs and services, job search preparation, advice and information, and assistance in education and training. Dancers report that this support comes from a variety of sources, including dance companies, unions, service organizations, and family and friends as well as the four transition centres. About 60 percent of former dancers in Australia, Switzerland and the US identified family and friends as the most important source of support for them during this critical period. In addition to the four career transition centres in the US, the UK, Canada and the Netherlands and IOTPD which have made significant progress in helping many dancers in these countries deal with the challenges of career change, there are a number of dance companies and dance schools around the world that provide transition services specifically tailored to their own needs. Examples include companies such as the Birmingham Royal Ballet (UK), the Houston Ballet (US), the Nederlands Dans Theater (Netherlands), the Opéra National de Paris (France), the New York City Ballet (US), the Pacific Northwest Ballet (US), the Escuela del Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández (México), and schools like the Arts Education School (UK), Boston Ballet School (US), and St. Mary's College of California, School of Extended Education (US), among a number of others. Such programs provide a wide variety of career transition assistance for dancers, including support for training, job search, and information provision.

The four existing career transition centers in the US, the UK, the Netherlands and Canada have a total of 90 years of accumulated experience in the field of dance career transition. They have all found the problems of dancers in transition to be remarkably similar, involving economic, psychological and educational issues that need to be addressed. Over the years, each of these organizations has developed a range of programs and services that focus on the different

stages in a dancer's career, and have provided integrated support that is individually tailored to the needs of each dancer. Despite these similarities, the kinds of assistance provided through the four career transition centers vary, depending on cultural differences, the type and amount of social, health and educational support provided by government, and the resources available to the transition centres and other career transition programs.

Dancers uniformly find specific transition programs helpful, when such programs are available. Among the three countries surveyed, participation is greatest in the US, where transition programs have been and continue to be more common than in Australia and Switzerland. The increased availability of programs in all three countries in recent years is evidenced by the fact that participation among current dancers is greater than that among former dancers in each case. Even so, taken overall, the majority of dancers in all three surveyed countries have not participated in transition programs.

Some Remaining Challenges

While this study has provided information for a deeper understanding of dancers and the transition process, it may be only the beginning of a larger investigation in which, dancer transition should be seen in a much larger context. Workers around the world no longer have the security or constraint (depending on one's point of view) of having a single job from youth to middle or old age. Multiple careers as well as multiple jobs are the prospect not only of artists. While schemes to nurture, retrain and capitalize on the skills of good employees occur in many occupations and in many countries, generally they have not been transferred to the arts.

Resistance to transition and to preparation for it remains. One US dancer complained, "When I busted my leg doing a Broadway show Management said, 'Sorry to kick you when you're down but we're not renewing your contract.' How's that for pain? No leg to stand on." And for some dancers, the resistance is self-inflicted. A former dancer who danced for nineteen years with the New York City Ballet commented, "Regarding the dancer's inability to ASK for help: I think this is the most important lesson I had to learn and am still learning."

If there is one central lesson about career transition for dancers we have learned it is that transition occurs over a period of time, and the dance-related attributes of commitment, loyalty and discipline are translatable into many other occupations. But we have more to learn about the real nature of that transition. For example, many dancers undertake a break from dancing and, rather than leaving the arena altogether or permanently, they exit and re-enter the marketplace at different points and sometimes in different capacities. This "career cycling" is something we know little about and while there is some evidence that it occurs in a number of countries, it bears further study. As one dancer remarked, "As an independent dancer in Western Australia where funding is limited one is in a constant state of transition. Projects are short, work in between difficult to negotiate in terms of time and the not knowing who will get funding and when leads to an inability to plan any aspect of your life."

For the most part, our data on career transition for dancers show that expectations and realities differ. This knowledge is important not only for current and future transition centers and programs, but for policy makers and funders interested in making the best use of the human capital from a highly disciplined, dedicated and committed workforce at the end of a special relationship.

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Notes

¹ The full report of this project is published as Baumol, Jeffri and Throsby (2004); see also the adjunct advocacy report arising from the project (Levine, 2004). Some representative earlier studies of the transition issue in dance are: Weston (1982); Beall (1989); International Organization for the Transition of Professional Dancers (1995); Dancer Transition Resource Center (1996); Theater Instituut Nederland (1998); Greben (2002); L'Opera National de Paris (2002).

² Further detail of the Australian transition survey is contained in Throsby and Hollister (2005).

³ Quoted in Upper (2004).

⁴ There are dancer transition centers in the US, the UK, the Netherlands and Canada.

⁵ Quoted in Upper (2004).

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Appendix A

Hypothesis 1: An income subsidy can play a substantial role in permitting the former dancer to undertake the effort needed to prepare for a subsequent career.

Hypothesis 2: Current funding of dancer retraining for a post-transition career is generally insufficient to cover the cost of such programs.

Hypothesis 3: Retraining promises to provide a substantial improvement in the dancer's earnings after transition, particularly if the retraining occurs relatively early in the dancer's career.

Hypothesis 4: Post-dance career retraining may offer benefits primarily in the long run, but may exacerbate the dancer's financial problems in the early stages of transition.

Hypothesis 5: Training for a second career during the period of dance activity is a realistic alternative, but only for some types of dance activity. The time demands of a professional dance career may leave insufficient time for an adequate level of training.

Hypothesis 6: For a substantial proportion of dancers, a post-transition career totally divorced from dance may not be a realistic possibility.

Hypothesis 7: Systematic programs of placement and apprenticeship of dancers with no ancillary skills at the time of career transition are likely to be most remunerative and satisfying when the new position is in the performing arts or some related arena.

Hypothesis 8: For dancers switching to careers that are not dance-related, the older/more mature the dancer is at the time of career transition, the less favorable the dancer's subsequent earnings are likely to be.

Hypothesis 9: Substantial awareness of the challenges of transition (which can be assisted by career counseling) may facilitate increases in income after transition.

Hypothesis 10: Dancers tend to be badly informed about matters such as future income prospects and the challenges of career transition. Such information can help prospective dancers' satisfaction with a subsequent career after transition.

Hypothesis 11: Dancers tend systematically to overestimate their likely incomes and the length of their careers.

Hypothesis 12: Dancers tend to disregard their health risks.